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EFFECT OF WAR CONDITIONS ON NEGRO LABOR

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COMING as I do from life and work in the South for a number of years and having seen much of Negro life in northern centers, I count it no small privilege to have an opportunity to speak in the interest of the millions of struggling, aspiring Negro wage-earners who themselves have little means or opportunity of expressing their needs.

In speaking upon the "Effect of War Conditions on Negro Labor" the subject should be divided into three main parts: (1) The change in the relation of Negro wage-earners to white employers, North and South; (2) the change in the relation of Negro wage-earners to white wage-earners and (3) the change in the Negro himself.

To discuss first the change in the relation of the Negro wage-earner to white employers, the point divides itself into two parts: namely, the change in relation to employers in the North and the change in relation to employers in the South.

Preceding the war period, Northern employers in industries, on railroads and in mines had very little contact or experience with Negro labor. With few exceptions, it might be said that Northern industrial employers as a whole had almost no relations with Negro labor. The experience, therefore, of these employers during the war was largely experimental and with results varying according to the wisdom of their methods.

To illustrate: During the first stages of the migration of Negroes to the North in the years 1915 and 1916, one railroad system went indiscriminately into the wholesale transportation of thousands of Negro laborers to work along its lines. The result was not satisfactory because many of those transported had little or no interest except to secure free transportation North. In contrast to this, another railroad system, because of careful selection, had satisfactory experience in retaining for a considerable period more than three-fourths of the men they brought from the South.

Again, a clothing manufacturer in Detroit, partly as a philanthropic enterprise and partly as a possible profitable business venture, opened a factory and carried through to a successful conclusion an experiment of using Negro women and girls in garment making. He told me that his greatest difficulty was the timidity of the women and their lack of belief that they could gain the facility necessary to earn as large a weekly wage as that drawn by white workers operating power machines. But after one or two of the Negro girls had succeeded in earning such wages for one week, the hardest difficulty of the experiment was removed. Some publicity about this experiment brought inquiry from other clothing manufacturers. The result was that additional openings were made for Negro women in garment trades in Detroit and Chicago.

To deal with such problems in the mobilization of Negro wage-earners for winning the war, the Department of Labor formed Negro Workers' Advisory Committee in ten states. These committees by states, counties and cities are made up of representatives of Negro wage-earners, of white employers and, wherever possible, of white wage-earners. These committees have served as connecting links between employers and many organizations such as churches, lodges, women's clubs and betterment agencies through which Negro workers are influenced. Thus these committees helped to bring employers and white workers into such touch with Negro workers that all sides received satisfactory impressions during the first steps of introducing Negroes into industrial plants. In a number of cases in Ohio, Illinois, Michigan and New Jersey the facts about the success of employing Negro workers along several lines, especially the employment of Negro women, have been brought favorably to the attention of employers who had heretofore given no consideration to the matter. These illustrations indicate the fact that these first experiences of Northern employers with Negro labor were largely experimental. In a number of cases they frankly said they did not desire to have the Negro, but were taking him under the pressure of extreme war-labor needs.

But, let me emphasize that wherever as in Detroit, in Chicago, in Cleveland and in other places, there has been intelligent guidance so that the first experience of the employer

has been satisfactory to him and wherever there has been intelligent guidance for Negro workers, the experiment has usually been successful. Northern employers have testified that they have received a favorable impression of the capacity of Negroes, of their readiness to learn, and of their responsiveness to good wages and fair treatment.

A number of private welfare agencies have been of great service in this connection both to employers and to the Negro newcomers to Northern industrial centers. Without such intelligent guidance, employers have given up as a hopeless attempt their experiment of using Negro labor.

Taking next the change in the Negro's relation to employers in the South, perhaps the most far-reaching effect of the war conditions has been the decided change in the estimate placed upon the Negro as a factor in the productive life of the South. Preceding the war and the migration north there was such a surplus of Negro workers in many localities that when one worker dropped out or departed it was an easy matter to secure another to fill his place. After the migration north had developed and after there was a considerable increase in war demands for the building of cantonments and munitions plants in the South, a shortage of labor followed inevitably. Because of this shortage, there arose a revaluation of Negro labor. The Southern employer began to attach a new importance to the Negro wage-earner.

In the second place, while in some localities attempts were made to use compulsory measures to force workers to stick to their tasks, in a majority of localities the larger view of persuasion and better treatment has prevailed. The result is that such reasonable measures as increase of wages, the improvement of working conditions and the enlargement of educational and other community facilities have gained headway. Thoughtful representatives of both races have met in many localities to discuss their problems. In these ways better understanding, greater contentment and increased production on the part of Negro workers have been promoted. Public opinion as expressed in the white public press has been more favorable toward the Negro, and the desire for meting out justice to him has found increased expression. May I again venture to refer to the special work of the Department of

Labor through its Negro Workers' Advisory Committees and through its state supervisors of Negro Economics appointed by the Department? In Florida, in Mississippi, in Georgia in North Carolina and in Virginia these committees, made up of representative Negro citizens and representative white citizens, together with these supervisors, who are Negroes of ability, have been large factors in securing conferences of the races and frank discussion of local labor problems from the thinking people of both groups. In this way, more amicable adjustment of working and living conditions in the South is being promoted. Similar committees and officials have been appointed in five northern states.

It should be emphasized, that although these efforts to adjust relations of white employers and Negro wage-earners in the South during the unusual war conditions have been largely experimental, the experiment has been successful beyond the most sanguine expectations. The experiment, North and South, has established beyond question the practical value of the plan by which representatives of Negro wage-earners meet representatives of white employers in committees and conferences. It has demonstrated that such committees and conferences can achieve substantial results in adjusting the local Negro labor problems, which changing conditions and relations have produced.

Let us turn, now, to the effect of war conditions on Negro labor through the gradually changing attitude of white wage-earners. This part of the question is largely to the forefront in the North. In many of the war industries, there was such a demand for labor, both North and South, that large numbers of white workmen passed to the higher-paid occupation. As a consequence, Negroes were freely admitted to many of the occupations formerly monopolized by white workers and from which Negroes were previously excluded. With the demand for labor so much greater than the supply, the fear of white workmen that Negroes would be their competitors at a lower wage was greatly lessened in many semi-skilled and skilled occupations.

It may be well to remember that this danger of paying Negroes lower wages exists not because Negroes want lower wages than other workers but because, as in the case of women

workers, there is a prevalent idea that Negro wage-earners should be paid less than white wage-earners for the same work. We have actually had governmental wage-fixing authorities to act upon this idea.

Those who accept this notion seem to overlook the fact that the Negro buys his bread, butter and beefsteak in the same market as other purchasers; that investigations have shown that he pays higher rent for similar houses, and that his clothing must be bought at current prices in about the same quantity as other workers. It would seem that the Negro is expected to produce from his dark skin some sort of alchemy which will transmute smaller pay than white workers receive into equal standards of food, shelter and clothing in spite of similar demands from grocer, landlord and clothier.

Some of the most striking evidence of the change in the attitude of white workmen is the growing recognition given Negro workmen by white labor unions. In many of the city centers where union organization is strong, the unions are opening their doors to Negro members. In such centers as Chicago and Cleveland Negroes are represented in labor locals and union councils. But there still remains considerable fear of competition in the future and this reacts in some occupations to keep up the hostility of white workers toward the Negro's entry into these fields. It is reasonable to conclude, however, that white wage-earners today look upon the entrance of Negroes into the higher grades of occupations with less opposition than existed before the war.

The contact in industry and in the community of the white and Negro working classes offers one of the most delicate and difficult problems of the changing order. It is here, also, that the experiment of the Department of Labor with its Negro Workers' Advisory Committees has pointed a significant way to secure the introduction of the Negro into industry by peaceful agreement and understanding of all whose interests are affected rather than by force and the confusion of misunderstanding. Already race disturbances in East St. Louis; Chester, Pa. and Philadelphia have called attention to the need of peaceful adjustment. The federal government as the best and most impartial agent may well come to the aid of citizens, white and black, in these local communities and help

adjust such racial labor problems before outbreaks occur rather than make investigations afterwards. Many private organizations such as were referred to a few minutes ago are eagerly doing their best. They are ready to join hands under government co-operation.

We come, now, to the third decided effect of war conditions upon Negro labor: namely, the effect upon the Negro himself. The first effect upon the Negro was to increase his mobility. Let me remind you that when the great war started not only did immigration from Europe practically cease, but thousands of the foreign born went home in response to the call of their countries' needs. Northern employers who had depended upon the immigrant for labor found their labor supply vanishing. At the same time their contracts for European war orders were increasing by leaps and bounds. The owners and operators of Northern mines, factories and railroads faced a serious labor shortage. They soon discovered an unworked labor supply in the Negroes of the South. Early in the spring of 1915, their agents began to comb the South seeking these workers.

Preceding the appearance of Northern labor agents in the South, floods and drouths, the spread of the boll weevil in the cotton states, the low price of cotton for several years preceding the war, lynchings and other racial friction, together with other unsatisfactory local conditions, had created economic and community situations that caused unusual restlessness in the Negro population. There was needed only the creation of such a labor vacuum in the North and the guiding hand of the labor agent to draw thousands of unskilled Negro workers, along with some of the skilled workers, into Northern industrial centers. It has been estimated that by January 1, 1918, between four hundred thousand and five hundred thousand Negroes had migrated north. The Department of Labor has now in the press a report on this migration. The larger part of the investigation was made by three Southern white men. And they attribute this movement to specific causes as outlined in this general statement just given.

This effect of war conditions on Negro labor not only increased its mobility by moving about a half million of Negroes from one section of the country to the other, but it also acceler-

ated the constant, slower migration to Northern centers, a movement which has been going on for more than a generation.

The change under war conditions did more than this. Not only did thousands move, but also there was created in the mind of Negro rural peasants and urban wage-earners a new consciousness of the fact that they have the liberty and the opportunity to move freely from place to place. The migration broke down much of their timidity. It gave the rank and file the belief that they could move to another part of the country and succeed in gaining a foothold in its industrial life and activity.

The effects of the war changes went even further. The mind of the masses of the Negro people received the impression that all kinds and types of work might at some time be open to them; that they need not be content with clinging to poorer paid occupations but might aspire to those requiring greater efficiency and affording larger pay. And here let me emphasize what a change in Negro life this means. In years past in New York and other cities Negro boys and girls dropped out of school in the lower grades because they repeatedly said there was no use in going any further, when a Negro could only get a menial job anyway and that they were already prepared for that. I sometimes surmise what the American public would do if in some way it could understand that North and South, on railroads, in factories, in erection of buildings and in government projects, thousands of workmen have been denied the fundamental opportunity of earning an honest living at jobs for which they were competent for no other reason than because they are Negroes. A prominent writer several years ago said Negroes could get any job under the sun. He overlooked the fact that today much of industry is carried on in the shade.

To sum up the point in a sentence, the migration of these thousands of Negro workers to the North and the consequent changes under war conditions brought consciously to their minds the fact that freedom for any one means liberty to move freely from place to place and opportunity to change his job when it is advantageous to do so.

In parenthesis, let me add that this new consciousness of liberty which is dawning upon the Negro people calls not only

for the best guidance their own leaders can give, but also for the sympathetic understanding of white Americans. Negroes are faced with the problem of walking the narrow path of liberty and of avoiding the precipice of license. To shake off the bondage of servility and to take on the restraints of civility is no easy task for any people.

Another effect of the war upon the Negro himself has been to open up a wider range of occupations, in the North especially. This might logically be discussed under the point of the relation of Negroes to white employers, but the result has been felt largely within the Negro group. Hence it is placed in this part of the discussion. This change has been more far-reaching than the most hopeful might have expected for the next twenty years.

In 1910 there were 5,192,535 Negroes of the nation gainfully employed. This was about one-half of the total Negro population. More than one-half of those gainfully employed were engaged in agriculture and nearly one-half of those in agriculture were only farm laborers. In manufacturing, in transportation and in trade occupations the large majority of Negroes, male and female, previous to the war had been given opportunity to work principally as laborers, porters and the like—the poorer paid places. Furthermore, more than one-fifth of the Negroes gainfully employed in 1910 were classified as engaged directly in domestic and personal service. In 1908-9 I made some studies of the Negro at work in New York and other northern cities. At that time probably more than 85 per cent of Negro women gainfully employed in northern centers and about 75 per cent of Negro men were engaged in domestic and personal services.

War conditions have made some changes. Just how great the changes have been we cannot tell before the census of 1920. But in some northern cities, the changes have been significant. In Detroit, Michigan, in 1914, for example, there were probably not a thousand Negroes in all the factories in that great automobile center. The latest report from Detroit about two months ago stated that probably between twelve and fifteen thousand are now engaged in the automobile industries of that city alone. In the steel districts of Pittsburgh, within twelve months, the number of Negro workers in the various plants

increased in some cases 35 per cent and in others as high as 100 per cent. I am informed that the General Electric Company of Pittsburgh, which had not employed Negroes before 1914, now employs scores of both men and women. In New York, where ten years ago it was quite difficult to get a Negro girl admitted into one of the cheaper branches of the garment trades, now scores of Negro women are daily employed and the manufacturers are advertising for more.

With these enlargements in the field of occupation has come increased pay. Since many immigrant women have been drawn into industry, even domestic and personal service is now offering Negro women wages that permit a high standard of living. In Pittsburgh today wages of Negro women in domestic and personal service are ranging from seven and eight dollars a week with room and board to fifty dollars a month with room and board; three dollars a day are being paid for day's work with carfare and one or two meals in the bargain.

With an opportunity to engage in the higher-paid occupations and with the accompanying higher wages, there have come a larger purchasing power and desire for more of the comforts and conveniences of life. They are, I regret to say, having great difficulty in most northern cities either to rent or to buy good houses in which to live. They are forced into congested and often undesirable neighborhoods. But they are struggling for better conditions. Of course, sometimes the increased earnings have gone into unwise expenditures. It can be said with assurance, however, that the effect of the war upon the Negro worker himself was to create in him new aspirations for higher standards of living. Even the instance of unwise expenditures may be regarded in that light. The writer has seen numbers of Negroes who had moved from one and two room cabins of the far South within a few short months seeking modern houses with all the conveniences of sewerage, electric lights and gas ranges. One observer in a New Jersey community said, after a year's observation of these newcomers, that at first they were ungainly, ill-clad and went about the streets as "strangers in a strange land." In a few months, these same newcomers had taken on many of the standards of dress and deportment of the community. The adaptation had been very much more rapid than that of the foreign-born.

They bore themselves as if they had been living in that community all their natural lives.

A number of employers in industries who have taken on these Negro workers have pointed out the need of leading them away from their characteristic timidity and fear on entering a new occupation. With the passing of this timidity and fear has come a desire to be taught and a spirit of aggressiveness which has called for guidance. In this connection, namely, teaching the Negro worker efficiency and thrift, and the necessity of making good on the job after he has been helped to get it, the Department of Labor has rendered large service during the war period by means of its special representatives in ten states and the connection of its Negro Workers' Advisory Committees with many organizations and agencies working among Negroes.

This war-time experience of the Negro with the sudden movement of large numbers from the South to the North has resulted in a remarkable consensus of opinion among Negroes, North and South, with reference to certain fundamental things they want. There has developed among them a growing consciousness of the desire for some of the real, substantial things of American democracy and they are reaching out after them. During the past two years, the speaker has visited many localities North and South and has taken special pains to talk with all classes of Negro workers both in industry and agriculture. This canvass of opinion has been among Negroes working on railroads, in mines, in factories; hotel porters, hackmen, farmers, plantation tenants, farm hands, tradesmen, business men, ministers, doctors, lawyers and housewives. Efforts were made to learn from these people what the essential things are which the great majority of them consider they should have as the outcome of this war.

The results of this inquiry may be summarized under five headings: First, Negroes desire a fair chance to get work and to hold work on the same conditions and with the same pay as other workers. Repeatedly, the appeal to them to be ready to give 100 per cent work in return for what they ask just as other workers are expected to do has met with most hearty response. When such a point has been mentioned before public audiences, it has been met with loud applause. And

following such responses the reply has always come back that they wish to get their jobs, to hold their jobs and to be paid for their work uncursed by color.

Second, I have found a wide-spread desire for education of all kinds. Negroes say they want more and better training that they may develop their capacity for greater efficiency which will enable them to take a larger part in the great world's work. When they are blamed for being inefficient, they point with reason to the lack of educational opportunity which keeps them from the necessary training in efficiency. They ask why they should be blamed for not having that which they have never had a chance to secure. And there is a general belief among Negroes that the larger part of this educational opportunity should be furnished by public funds, and especially by the federal government.

In the third place, there is a united demand of workers for the removal of race discriminations in public courts, public conveyances and for provision in city and country for the same facilities of community improvement for them as for others. There is a consensus of opinion among Negro workers wherever I meet them that they want good houses, well-paved streets, sanitary arrangements, and the other community facilities which every modern community now considers essential to wholesome living.

The fourth thing so generally demanded by Negro workers can probably be best expressed in the words of an unlettered southern Negro farmer to a large audience of Negroes in conference with some of the representative white citizens of their county. He said to the presiding officer, a prominent business man, "and, Sir, we wants to help say who governs us." The presiding officer replied by saying that the liberal-minded white men of that state proposed to see that this desire was satisfied. Negroes want representation in the councils where their interests are being considered and decided. They seek this as a part of the democracy for which they have shared their possessions, their labor and their blood. Negro sons and brothers and fathers have died by the side of white sons and brothers and fathers. The Negro people feel that the democracy for which these men suffered and died should be shared by all.

In the fifth place, gradually and as yet in the twilight, there is rising in the consciousness of Negroes, the belief that as men and women they are ends in themselves along with other people for whose self-development and happiness they should work and live. For more than ten generations, black men and women have known only the idea that they were born and trained to be workers and servants for others. Their minds are shedding this notion and they are coming to believe in themselves as men and women to whom the blessings of the world are to come and by whom the enjoyment of these blessings are to be shared.

I have tried to present some of the effects of war conditions on Negro labor, namely: the change in the relation of Negro workers to white employers, North and South; the change in their relation to white workmen and the change in the Negro himself. If now you ask: What of the future during reconstruction and the prosperity of peace which we all hope will follow? Let me say first that in my humble opinion this situation should no longer be left as an emergency matter without a constructive national policy and program of work.

These changes under war conditions have shown that Negro labor is a matter of national interest affecting white employers, white employees, and Negro workers, and through them the whole American people; that employers want to buy the services of these workers and are willing to offer wages and conditions which will allow a larger life; that Negro workers have been awakened to seek these larger opportunities in return for their labor and that the white workers do not wish that the introduction of the Negro shall jeopardize their welfare. We have then, in this concrete, material problem a matter of common interest to all, which may serve as a basis for a constructive policy of race relations. Some definite steps need to be made in line with a resolution framed and presented at a reconstruction conference in New York city last week. The resolution reads as follows: "That every program for national and community reconstruction shall adequately and consciously include provision for our Negro fellow citizens and for their co-operation therein."

And what are some of the Negro labor problems of reconstruction and peace times? The following points may be mentioned:

1. The thousands of Negro workers in war industries who will now be shifted to peace-time industries, along with other workers, need special attention the same as during the period when they were being shifted into war industries.
2. Probably between 400,000 and 500,000 workers have migrated from the South to northern communities. The potential race friction and difficulties of adjustment, both with white wage-earners and in industrial communities, where they must find community life with the white residents, are legitimate concerns of the nation. Other migrants will probably come within a few years.
3. There will be special problems connected with the adjustment of colored women in industry and probably in domestic and personal service.
4. The problems of creating increased efficiency and thrift among Negro workers will be even greater than during the war.
5. In the South the common interest of the white employer who wants to buy the services which the Negro wage-earner has to sell will make the adjustment of the labor situation one of the most far-reaching factors in bringing about just and amicable race relations. These conditions are acute, growing out of the present unsettled conditions following migration and war restlessness of the two races.
6. The adjustment of the farm labor situation in the South is very largely a Negro labor question.
7. The problems of demobilization of the thousands of Negro soldiers will probably call for more tact and judgment than were needed during the period when they were being drafted out of production into the army. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that the return of the Negro soldier to civil life is one of the most delicate and difficult questions confronting the Nation, north and south.
8. The question of living conditions of Negro wage-earners must receive more attention during the period of peace than it could receive during the war period.
9. The problem, therefore, of finding ways by means of which there may be counsel and co-operation between white employers, white fellow employees and Negro wage-earners will probably be more critical with the coming of peace than during the period of the war.

Furthermore, this adjustment of Negro workers, north and south, during war-time experiences shows clearly that co-operative committees and conferences of white employers, and white and Negro workers have brought practical and constructive results in meeting such problems. White employers and white workmen have looked with approval upon the plan of meeting representatives of Negroes at the council table. Several private organizations such as were mentioned a few minutes ago have demonstrated over a longer period the value of such racial co-operation.

Finally, unlike many other problems brought to the surface by war conditions, this racial labor situation probably can best be guided toward a constructive policy through the help of the federal government acting as a central, co-ordinating agency for the private organizations and interests involved. Repeatedly, I have found white employers and white workmen willing to meet Negro representatives under Department of Labor supervision, when they would not consider it otherwise. Negroes have comparatively few unions or employers' organizations. They have felt the power of both organized capital and organized labor. Negroes have had to deal with both in an effort to secure an American's chance to work.

Yesterday, when I read the resolutions of the councillors of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States on regularity of employment, the right of workers to organize, a minimum wage and their other newly adopted principles of industrial democracy, immediately there arose in my mind the question, how far Negro workers will share these benefits just as other workers do. The announcement of the new policy of the captains of industry and commerce gave new strength to my conviction that there should be some governmental guidance of the private forces toward a constructive policy dealing with the reconstruction and peace problems growing out of the effect of war conditions upon Negro labor.

[312]